

US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell said the Chinese are carefully watching “the path and progress” of Taiwanese democracy and that they “probably see a few things that worry them enormously.”

Answering questions at a Webcast conference on US-China relations recently, Campbell said the Chinese also saw things in Taiwanese democracy to which they “aspire.”

He said the “wholeness” of the Taiwanese democratic experience was not lost on either the Chinese leadership or the Chinese people.

Campbell, who accompanied US President Barack Obama on a recent visit to China, said the clashes and discord accompanying the Taipei power struggle worried ordinary Chinese the most.

Friends in China, he said, were concerned by how “divisive” Taiwanese politics had become.

“They worry that if they move in such a direction that they too will have these enormous difficulties in making transitions between parties. These are hard questions that are difficult to answer,” he said.

Over the past 10 years, Campbell said, some things — such as the concept of democracy, local elections and issues associated with greater participation — have become widely talked about.

It would have been “unthinkable” to discuss them “just a short period of time ago,” he said.

Campbell added: “Now, I hear in much more common circumstances a dialogue that a few years ago would have been impossible.”

Campbell quickly added that this did not mean democracy was “right around the corner” for China.

But there is an appreciation and a recognition in China of the role that democracy has played not just in Taiwan but in Japan, South Korea and other parts of Asia, he said.

Campbell said the US welcomed the dialogue now taking place between Beijing and Taipei.

There is still a long way to go, Campbell said, and the focus is primarily on economic matters. Still, he said, there is a recognition in Washington that the cross-strait dialogue is a very hopeful sign.

Asked which of a series of tinderbox issues — including Taiwan — was the greatest threat to

Chinese 'curious' about democracy in Taiwan

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US-China relations, Campbell said: "Each and every one of those issues if mishandled could pose a challenge. Each of these problems has at its core the prospect of incidents and unintended actions spinning out of control."

"The problem is not simply the issues themselves, it is also that the United States and China [do] not have much experience dealing with problem management," Campbell said.

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